A SERMON FOR ALL SAINTS' DAY
November 1, 2009

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 116:1–15
Revelation 21:1–6
John 11:17–27

"Precious in the sight of the Lord
is the death of his faithful ones."
Psalm 116:15 (NRSV)

"In the end is my beginning."

T.S. Eliot
"East Coker" in *Four Quartets*

We are grateful, O God, for those who taught us,
by their example, their courage and faith, how to believe.
We are grateful that they are part of a great cloud of witnesses
who surround us and continue to sustain us.
Now speak your word of comfort and challenge to us.
In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We began the day last Tuesday, the one-year anniversary of the death of our colleague, Dana Ferguson, with a brief service of memorial and remembrance, gathering her staff colleagues, a few leaders, and members of the congregation who were her "care team." We remembered her friendship, her love for Fourth Presbyterian Church, her lasting impact as our Mission and Executive Associate Pastor, her laughter and her faith, and we thanked God for the gift of her life.

Later that same day, in the evening, I sat in the balcony of Symphony Center and listened to the absolutely beautiful Brahms' *Requiem*, presented by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus. I read in the program notes that while Johannes Brahms was not a conventionally religious man, he read scripture throughout his life, from a Bible given to him in childhood and that the event that inspired him to bring together and complete this extraordinary piece of music was the death of his mother.

His choices of scripture for the *Requiem* were what I needed to hear that evening, and it seemed to me that members of the chorus understood that they were doing something more than performing great classical music, that they were instruments of words and ideas that many believe are, in an ultimate sense, the truth about human life and about us. They were, for me, conveyors of truth, proclaimers of the Word of God, as they played and sang with both reverence and passion -

> Blessed are they who mourn for they shall be comforted . . .
> They who sow in tears shall reap in joy . . .
> I will comfort you as one whom a mother comforts . . .

And then the final gloriously triumphant chorus:

> Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.
> Yes, says the Spirit,that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow after them.

After a long, sustained standing ovation—like what happened here, at the end of Dana Ferguson's funeral, when Tower Brass played a Dixieland version of "For a Closer Walk with Thee"—the audience, I thought, was expressing a sense of profound hopefulness and gratitude.

With all of that on my mind and heart, I went home and pulled from my shelves one of my very favorite books, Robert McAfee Brown's *The Pseudonyms of God*, published in 1972. The price printed on the cover was $3.25. It's a collection of theological essays by Brown, who was a distinguished professor of theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York. I liked Brown a lot. He was a Navy chaplain with the Marine Corps in the South Pacific during World War II. He was no sentimentalist about the human condition, because he had seen the worst of it. And he loved his grandchildren unabashedly.

The essay I was looking for that evening is "Light in Thick Darkness: A Meditation on a Particular Death." It is the sermon he prepared for the funeral of his close friend and colleague David Roberts, also a professor at Union, "a labor of love he called it." He told how he looked forward to a lifetime of teaching and conversing with and sharing laughter and lively conversation with Roberts. And he confessed that by dying Roberts had taught him the reality and truth of words that had been only words before—words like "the communion of saints," words we say we believe every Sunday morning but don't think about much.

Brown wrote, "Never before had I been aware of the almost incredible depth and splendor of 'I believe in the communion of saints.'"

“I have discovered a wonderful thing,” Brown wrote. “I am not alone. I am surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, David preeminently among them. David’s death brings me into an awareness of eternity that makes eternity wonderfully real.”

Brown cited C.S. Lewis, who reflected on the death of his dear friend Charles Williams: “No event has so corroborated my faith in the next world as Williams did simply by dying. When the idea of death and the idea of Williams met in my mind, it was the idea of death that was changed.” Brown said the same: when the idea of David and the idea of death met in his mind, it was the idea of death that changed.

David’s death, which “at first seemed totally bad,” Brown reflected, “has become a sacramental means of grace for me, and in that sense at least has shown forth the love and goodness and mercy of God, so that I can be filled with gratitude to God for David’s life, short as it was, and also be filled with gratitude to God that in the midst of the deepest sorrow I have yet known in this life, God has been pleased to reveal something of his love and grace.”

That is the heart of it, the essence of Christianity: the trust that even in the deepest sorrow and thickest darkness, there is light and love and hope. And it comes from the witness of scripture, beginning to end: the history of God’s people down through many centuries, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the history of the church. From beginning to end the Bible is about the two most profound and vexing questions: “Where did I come from” and “Where am I going?” The answer to both questions is the same: we came from God (Genesis), and we are going to God (the last book, the book of Revelation).

We pretty much ignore the book of Revelation. It makes us nervous with its bizarre and frightening imagery: the four horsemen of the apocalypse, an image which has been co-opted by many. For instance, Grantland Rice, in one of the most famous sports columns ever written, used it to describe the Notre Dame backfield in a game played October 18, 1924, against Army. Notre Dame won 13-7. Rice called the Notre Dame quarterback, fullback, and halfbacks the four horsemen of the apocalypse. And more recently, in Johnny Cash’s“The Man Comes Around,” one of the last songs he wrote, the Man—never named—is obviously Jesus Christ and much of the imagery comes right out of the book of Revelation.

We also stay away because the book of Revelation has been hijacked, distorted, and manipulated down through history by extremists and opportunists and sometimes violent terrorists for ideological reasons and for profit. The authors of the *Left Behind* series of best-sellers have

discovered a seemingly endless source of profit based on their skill at co-opting the images in Revelation and exploiting the endless gullibility of American readers.

My first real exposure to Revelation was from my Grandmother McCormick, a lifelong faithful Presbyterian, who lived into her nineties. She had long white hair, read her Bible, prayed, and listened to the radio: opera on Saturday afternoon, the Pittsburgh Pirates, and to radio evangelists and predictors of doom and gloom and the near end of history in the final apocalyptic battle of Armageddon. Somewhere Grandma must have known better, but these charlatans convinced her that the Great Beast in Revelation was the Soviet Union and Nikita Khrushchev and that the battle of Armageddon would be a nuclear holocaust between the Soviet Union and the U.S.A. Grandma was convinced that my buying into this was integral to our victory. And in the process these purveyors of fear, guilt, and hatred convinced her to give them much of the little money she had.

You simply have to know the context—when and why the book of Revelation was written. We do know that it was written by a man named John decades, maybe more, after the life and death of Jesus, a man who was exiled, in a prison cell, a cave actually on the Greek Island of Patmos. We know that the book is actually a letter he wrote to several small Christian communities, churches, in Asia Minor. He names them for us: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. We know that those small Christian enclaves were undergoing fierce persecution by Rome at the moment. It is difficult for us to imagine that because you are a Christian the police might knock on the door and haul you off to jail, where you would be tortured until you named the other members of your church and then executed, thrown to wild beasts for the emperor’s entertainment, or doused in oil and burned as a torch in the night. Emperors like Diocletian, the last persecutor of Christians, became convinced that it was a matter of state security. Christians, their advisors said, were religious deviants whose belief in the supremacy of God, not emperor, was political subversion. They were traitors who needed to be eliminated for the security of the state.

So that is who John was writing to, whose very real fears and weeping he was addressing. And because of that danger he uses the wildest, most bizarre and creative symbols he can think of. His readers know who he means when he describes the whore of Babylon, or the great beast. It is Rome. They know what he means by a New Jerusalem, a beautiful city of peace and security and wholeness descending from heaven: the old Jerusalem is a pile of smoking rubble, having been leveled by the Romans in 70 A.D.

Old John tells them that there is light in the midst of their current darkness, that the absolute power in the universe is not Rome with its military might, its cruel authority. The absolute is God, a God of mercy and peace and compassion and love. History is headed—human history and their personal histories—not to Rome but to God. And ever since, his words of comfort and hope have inspired people in trouble, people oppressed by political power, oppressed because of their religion or race or gender or sexual orientation: American slaves, Christians in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, the mountains of Afghanistan, and, supremely, to people facing and pondering the reality of death, the death of their dear ones: friends, parents, spouses, children, and, of course, their own particular death.

“We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses,” the book of Hebrews announced. And the psalmist, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones.” Somehow in the mystery of God’s eternal love they are safe in God, in the fullness of God’s presence; their pain is given up to God who heals it; their tears are wiped away; there is no weeping, for death itself has been overcome.

And they— that cloud of witnesses, all the way from our parents and grandparents, back through time to the saints in Ephesus and Smyrna and Laodicea and beyond—they are, in God’s timeless mystery, a presence whose love abides and supports and encourages us still.

It’s a big idea, better sung and prayed than explained.

An interesting perspective is in Malcolm Gladwell’s book *Outliers*. Gladwell explores the lives of ordinary people who become extraordinarily successful and concludes that none of us is a self-made woman or man. We carry with us generations of people before us.

> People do not rise from nothing. We owe something to parentage. . . . People who stand before kings may look like they did it all by themselves. But they are invariably the beneficiaries of hidden advantages and extraordinary opportunities and cultural legacies that allow them to learn and work and make sense of the world. . . . The legacies passed down by our forebears shape the patterns of our achievement in ways we cannot begin to imagine. (p. 19).

Sister Joan Chittister: “We do not do it alone of course. We are companioned through life. Underneath it all, holding us up . . . are the people who love us. . . . They stand by. . . . They provide the unchanging foundation of love” (*Called to Question*).

And Madeleine L'Engle: "Here we are on the border of Christian mystery. We are not meant to be separated from those who have gone before us" (*Walking on Water*).

I had forgotten, frankly, that Dana Ferguson preached part of the All Saints' Day sermon, four years ago, November 6, 2005. I looked it up. We were also observing the fiftieth anniversary of the ordination of women to the ministry in the Presbyterian church. Dana said, "When I graduated from college, I gave my parents a little plaque that read, 'I am because of my parents' love.'" She told about those who had helped her believe the unlikely and unheard of—that she could be a minister. Her widowed grandmother and great aunt who ran the dime store; her Grandmother Ferguson who managed the funeral business; Ms. Margie; Ms. Sarah Dell: "They never gave up on me, never let me go, never stopped telling me I was one of God's beloved children.

"I am here physically," Dana said, having recently recovered from life-threatening illness, "because countless generations felt that each life was precious and valued enough to dedicate life to the world of medicine, and more particularly to the research and work of curing cancer. . . . They were able to save my life on more than one occasion." When I read those words it occurred to me that she was given three more years after what those of us close to her knew was a nearly fatal incident, that we were given three more years of Dana's love, laughter, and ministry.

"I am here today," she said, "because people showed me God's love for me and for this world."

"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones."

Dana's death, the deaths of all of those we have loved and lost—members of this congregation, members of our family: grandparents, uncles and aunts, parents, children, deaths a little while ago and a long while ago, our soldiers and Marines in Afghanistan, the caskets arriving at Dover in the middle of the night, our dear ones in ICU, little children cut down in the streets of Chicago, our friends, suddenly critically ill, much, much too soon, precious to God, every one—now they are part of a cloud of witnesses, supporting, encouraging, and loving us still.

Upon the death of his mother, the late Henri Nouwen wrote a book, *The Greatest Gift*, and said it beautifully:

> When we can reach beyond our fears to the One who loves us with a love that was there before we were born and will be there after we die; then oppression, persecution, even death will be unable to take our freedom.

> Once we have come to the deep inner knowledge—a knowledge more of heart than of mind—that we are born out of love and will die into love, that this love is our true Mother and Father, then all forms of evil, illness, and death lose their final power over us. (*Our Greatest Gift*)

"Born out of love—die into love": that is the hope and promise of the gospel. The dead do not die into nothingness, but into God, into love that is eternal, unchanging, forever.

In the end is our beginning . . .

> I saw a new heaven and a new earth . . . the new Jerusalem,
> coming down out of heaven from God.
> See—the home of God is among mortals,
> He will dwell with them as their God:
> And God himself will be with them,
> He will wipe every tear from their eyes,
> Death will be no more:
> mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.